



Open Evening – Oxbridge Pathway

This short booklet does not purport to provide a detailed explanation of the Oxbridge Admissions process, nor does it set out all the many and varied nuances of a successful Oxbridge application. It is hoped, however, that it addresses some of the actual questions which parents/guardians have asked in previous years and dispels some of the myths and misunderstandings which can surround an Oxbridge application.

How many A*s at GCSE does a student need in order to apply to Oxbridge?

No fixed number. All universities look at GCSE performance in the context of the school attended. Students do not need to have a certain GCSE profile in order to apply. The average GCSE profile of successful BHASVIC applicants in previous years has been 6/7 grade 8/9s. These GCSE profiles are 'retrospective' and GCSEs are only one of several factors Oxbridge and other leading universities consider. Oxford probably places a greater weighting on GCSEs than Cambridge, a weighting of about 25-30% in the final decision. It is undeniable that some subjects are much more competitive than others.

Students with a GCSE profile which is weaker than the lowest cited above, would probably be better to apply post A- level.

Can a student apply to Oxford and Cambridge and do they have to put it as their first choice on UCAS?

Oxford *OR* Cambridge. There are no 'choices' in the sense of 'order of preference' on the UCAS form. Students can make up to five 'equal' choices. The students' applications to the five universities are not ranked and the universities do not know where else a student has applied.

The deadline for applying to Oxbridge is 15th October (all applications must arrive at the universities by then) and so the BHASVIC deadline is usually mid-September. Students can apply to all five universities straightaway or add their other choices up until the UCAS deadline in mid-January.

Should the student apply to Oxford or Cambridge?

The most important factor should be course choice. Students should look closely at the A level subject requirements. BHASVIC students, state school students in general, are really bad at looking at the full range of courses on offer.

Cambridge places greater emphasis on performance in any AS exams, requiring not just an A but a very high A in terms of marks, especially in Maths. Both Oxford and Cambridge now have pre-interview and at-interview assessments although they use these rather differently. Students should look at these tests (more below). Oxford uses the tests, alongside GCSE and other information, to deselect pre-interview.

Students should largely ignore most of the material available on the Web; we live in a 'fake news', 'alternative facts' era.

What's the timescale for Oxbridge applications?

Here are the key dates for an Oxbridge application:

- **A1 all year:** Students ideally attend Oxbridge enrichment sessions in in A1
- **A1 February:** Students choose the Oxbridge pathway as a tutor pathway in A2
- **June A1 half-term:** Students must complete reference activities

- **A1-A2 Summer break:** Students must complete UCAS Apply forms for checks
- **A2 Pre-enrolment:** Compulsory Personal Statement Days prior to enrolment
- **A2 Mid-September:** completion of all Oxbridge applications
- **A2 October 1st:** deadline for Medicine applicants to register for the BMAT
- **A2 October 15th:** National deadline for Oxbridge UCAS applications
- **A2 October 15th:** deadline for applications for the Graduate Course in Medicine (applicants complete/submit the Graduate Course in Medicine application form in addition to their UCAS application)
- **A2 October date to be arranged:** Deadline for students to book relevant admissions tests through BHASVIC, taken at BHASVIC
- **A2 October 22nd:** deadline for completion and submission of online Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ) for Cambridge applicants
- **A2 Late October:** BMAT Medicine and pre-interview assessments taken – in BHASVIC
- **A2 Early November:** various dates for submission of any required written work
- **A2 Mid-November:** interview invitations
- **A2 December:** The majority of interviews in Oxford and Cambridge take place in the first three weeks of December (some may be a little earlier)
- **A2 January:** Oxbridge application decisions
- **A2 May:** final Firm & Insurance decisions by students

How should students prepare for the 'tests'?

All the tests are offered at BHASVIC with the exception of LNAT for Law at Oxford – beginning of November. Students can access full information about all the tests on the relevant Oxbridge website. There are many examples of past tests for Oxford courses. Cambridge Assessments only began last year and so there are few past papers. The long-standing TSA is a good model for some Cambridge tests and the BMAT for the Cambridge Natural Sciences Assessments. As with all Tests/Assessments it is crucial to understand the nature of the exam itself, timings, structure etc. Students should prepare for the Assessments steadily, thoroughly during the summer break, ensuring that some practice tests have been attempted within the correct exam timings.

The assessments do not usually require any new knowledge or material but some have a specification that students need to work through to prepare – this can include some GCSE knowledge that needs revisiting.

What's the best way to prepare for interviews?

The worst way to prepare for the interview is any form of 'training' or pre-prepared answers. The interviewers want flexibility of thought and an intelligent response to the questions asked. If an obviously pre-prepared answer is given then they'll simply ask a different question.

Ignore the frequent nonsense written in some papers about Oxbridge interviews. There are no 'trick questions', silly games about handshakes, where to sit, eye contact etc. It is an academic discussion, nothing more. The interviewers are not after 'the right answer' but the flexible application of existing knowledge to a new situation. It is about a working through a problem with the interviewers.

Cambridge tends to have two interviews on the same day at the College applied to. Oxford interviews may be spread over 2/3 days and may involve interviews at other Colleges too. Key qualities for a good interview: a student needs to listen to the question actually being asked and then articulate an informed thoughtful response. "The final piece of the jigsaw and not the final hurdle."

How important are extra-curricular activities?

Not at all. A student with a strong slate of extra-curricular activities will not be offered a place over a student with no extra-curricular experiences.

Oxbridge are looking for 'super-curricular' – in other words self-motivated academic reading and thinking 'beyond A level' – showing a lively, engaged, thoughtful mind. A student's fourth choice, the Portfolio choice in the second year at BHASVIC, may help here. An EPQ will not make the difference between gaining a place or not. It may create a framework for useful 'super-curricular' study.

Which colleges should students apply to and how should they choose a college?

Oxford and Cambridge argue very strongly that college choice does not impact upon the chances of gaining a place at the universities. This is almost certainly true. Students obsess over college choice; this is a waste of energy!

It is possible to do an 'open application' – the Universities will then send the application to a college with fewer direct applications for that subject. Ignore the general or subject-specific 'reputation' of a college. By way of example, Newton will not be teaching Maths at Trinity Cambridge. The final degree is from the university. The colleges effectively pool their differing expertise: a student at one college is commonly taught by an expert in another college. Most teaching, especially in the Sciences, is delivered at a university level in lectures and practicals.

Students should apply to the college they think they will feel most 'at home' in. Beautiful architecture tends to fade fairly quickly as a good reason for applying to a particular college. BHASVIC students have attended every Cambridge College and over half of Oxford's colleges. There are colleges which perhaps suit BHASVIC students, 'a good fit'.

Is Oxbridge 'too posh' and public school for BHASVIC students?

Over 250 BHASVIC students have gained offers over the past three years, eclipsing all the public schools in Sussex.

It is a regrettable fact access to the leading universities in the UK is still significantly determined by social class background. Other leading UK universities have 'worse' (if that's the word) state v public school statistics than Cambridge. So, students who pretend this is a reason for not applying to Oxbridge must also not apply to the likes of Bristol, Durham, St Andrew's. Some Oxbridge Colleges have significantly higher state school figures e.g. Mansfield College, Oxford and Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge. It is worth remembering that Oxford and Cambridge are almost certainly the two cheapest universities to go to.

When do students make their final university selections?

A2 May: Students keep a Firm and an Insurance offer. If they were made five offers, the student rejects three of these at this point. The vast majority of students who secure an Oxbridge offer put it as the Firm choice. For Humanities at Oxford this may well be the lowest offer a student receives!

Offers vary: Cambridge Sciences A*A*A* - A*A* A. Oxford Science offers range from A*A*A – A*AA. Oxford Humanities' offers are usually AAA (can be A*AA for Economics) Cambridge Humanities tend to be A*A*A – A*AA.

The big exception is Mathematics' offers from Cambridge where A*A*A* is the easy bit – two grade 1s in STEP being required as well. Students do not have to accept an Oxbridge offer. It is becoming more common for BHASVIC students to reject the Oxbridge offer in favour of such places such as Edinburgh. This is perfectly acceptable, 'normalising' Oxbridge. Oxford and Cambridge are not necessarily the best places for every student!

Isn't the whole process of applying just too time-consuming and stressful?

Not if the student is organised and approaches the whole process calmly, with a sense of perspective. The perspective being: Oxford and Cambridge are two outstanding universities but they are certainly not the be all and the end all.

'Yes' – there are other pieces of the Admissions 'jigsaw' to put in place, most notably the Admission Assessments and the interviews. Increasingly other universities are requiring pre-admission tests and interviews. This year the most challenging interviews were at Imperial not Oxbridge.

However, getting the whole UCAS form, Personal Statement, Reference etc completed by the end of September alleviates a good deal of pressure. Some students will have three or four offers by the October half term break ... that feels good. Most applicants now quite enjoy the interview process. No applicants in recent years have found the interview process ridiculously challenging and stressful.

Will a student's Oxbridge experience be too much hard work, leaving no time for extra-curricular activities?

There are so many variables here! These include subject being studied, self-discipline, capacity to 'work hard and play hard' etc. Sometimes students are inconsistent in their standards/judgments applying much harsher criteria to Oxbridge than other universities. The range of extra-curricular opportunities at Oxford and Cambridge is enormous. In both the Arts and Sports, students can participate at any level. BHASVIC students seem particularly keen on Ice Hockey at Cambridge! It is fair to say that students can find the first term very demanding but a sense of balance and realism soon develops. Three terms of eight weeks does mean that the workload is heavy but the breaks are long. Other stresses such as accommodation, food, transport, academic resources are effectively non-existent at Oxbridge.

In terms of value for money - contact hours, one-to-one tuition, practicals, teaching frequently by experts not just PhD students and so on – Oxbridge is outstanding. BHASVIC students have joined in some fantastic extra-curricular activities whilst at Oxbridge. Several have secured generous Travel Grants to pursue their studies overseas during the long summer vacation. Oxbridge students cannot have paid work (other than within College) during term times.

**If you have any questions please do get in touch with our Oxbridge co-ordinator
Natalya Luck – she would be very happy to answer them! n.luck@bhasvic.ac.uk**